

1938

PAINTINGS CONSTRUCTIONS SCULPTURES RELIEFS ESSAYS COLLAGE GOUACHE WATERCOLOUR PAPIER COLLE PAINTINGS CONSTR

AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS

I met quite  
a few Artists a few quite  
I saw in my collection  
I found a fine woman  
and all so refined so  
and very lovely people

# AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS

---

*Property of*  
*The Hilla von Rebay Foundation*

---

IV  
6512  
.A2  
A38



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2012 with funding from  
Metropolitan New York Library Council - METRO

<http://archive.org/details/amabst00amer>

By the fact of their active existence and production, the American Abstract Artists express the authenticity and autonomy of the modern movement in the United States. The word abstract is incorporated in our title as a provisional gesture, so that we can be identified as a particular group in our effort to clarify growing and actively significant concepts of art.

Abstract, like so many other words, is too often used as an idiosyncratic suggestion, rather than as a concept which defines particular values. To understand abstract art is, in reality, no more a problem than understanding any and all art. And this depends upon the ability of the individual to perceive essentials, to perceive that which is called universally significant, and to evaluate the unity and relationship that is contained in any work.

As the first and only comprehensive organization of its type in the United States, we are faced with the familiar problem of a largely unsympathetic and biased criticism, a criticism which merely negates, condemns, or ridicules. There is, however, a more encouraging response to our exhibitions and lectures, a response that could be especially experienced only by the form and action of a representative and authentic organization. Individuals working and studying against the odds of isolation can now be articulate and related to others working in similar directions.

The membership of this group is homogeneous to the extent of its recognition of mutual problems and limitations, and in its willingness to cooperate in the presentation and solution of these problems. We are, as in any group, heterogeneous and diverse in our concepts.

To place artistic, or any cultural effort on the level of a competition is to negate the method and meaning of knowledge. American Abstract Artists dedicates itself to the problems of the artist and the student, presented in the terms of method and activity that define

the artist; and limits itself accordingly for the purpose of clarification. As to the question of which aspects of life affect the artist in his effort, this is demonstrated by the character and efficacy of his activity and production; for this we present the individual artist.

No educated intelligence can draw the so-called "line of national culture" as an ambition and objective, without discerning its ambiguity. Beside being impossible, such a misconception is a negation of the very essence of cultural effort; the general heightening and application of knowledge. To make this negation may be politically expedient but it serves only to preserve and sway ignorance. While knowledge belongs to no nationality, particular nations do exist, and each nation has, and is, a peculiar and limited cultural development.

Considering the tempo of present political history and the importance of the various fields of knowledge in relationship to it, we can do nothing better than emphasize that the contemporary must respect the interpenetration and concatenation of all culture. True culture is recognizable when established from the standpoint of scientific thought and effort. For us it is established through the freedom to develop facilities and to maintain their proportional distribution, as civilized achievements, toward the enlivenment of existence—an unequivocal application toward the physical and psychic benefit of all humanity.

For these reasons, American Abstract Artists was formed in November of 1936. It has now attained a national scope and is more active in 1938.

—The Editors

## MEMBERSHIP

JOSEF ALBERS	LEO LANCES
ROSALIND BENGELSDORF	IBRAM LASSAW
ILYA BOLOTOWSKY	AGNES LYALL
HARRY BOWDEN	ALICE MASON
BYRON BROWNE	GEORGE L. K. MORRIS
MERCEDES JEANNE CARLES	GEORGE McNEIL
GIORGIO CAVALLON	MARGARET PETERSON
A. N. CHRISTIE	RALPH M. ROSENBERG
ANNA COHEN	LOUIS SCHANKER
BURGOYNE DILLER	CHARLES G. SHAW
WERNER DREWES	ESPHYR SLOBODKINA
HERZL EMANUEL	DAVID SMITH
SUSIE FRELINGHUYSEN	FLORENCE SWIFT
A. E. GALLATIN	ALBERT SWINDEN
FRITZ GLARNER	R. D. TURNBULL
BALCOMB GREENE	VACLAV VYTLACIL
GERTRUDE GREENE	RUDOLPH WEISENBORN
HANANIAH HARARI	WARREN WHEELOCK
CARL R. HOLTY	F. J. WHITEMAN
HARRY HOLTZMAN	H. I. WILDENBERG
DOROTHY JORALEMON	ROBERT J. WOLFF
RAY KAISER	BECKFORD YOUNG
FREDERICK KANN	JANET YOUNG
PAUL KELPE	W. N. ZOGBAUM

## ORGANIZATION

Our purpose is to unite abstract artists residing in the United States, to bring before the public their individual works, and in every possible way foster public appreciation for this direction in painting and sculpture. We believe that a new art form has been established which is definite enough in character to demand this united effort. This art is to be distinguished from those efforts characterized by expressionism, realistic representation, surrealism, etc.

We recognize the need for individuals to experiment and deviate at times from what may seem established directions. For this reason we place a liberal interpretation upon the word "abstract." What we desire is a broad inclusive organization of all artists in this country who have produced work sufficiently in character with this liberal conception. We invite into our membership the best known abstract artists in America, as well as those who are totally unknown. We invite also the members of any similar groups, assuring them that to join with us does not conflict with their own group relationships.

Since the abstract movement has enlisted a far greater number of American artists and students than is generally known, it has become necessary to exercise some sort of control, that we may insure a standard of clarity of statement in our exhibitions. For this reason applicants for membership are requested to submit examples of their work. To arrange for this, they are asked to write our chairman.

### **associate membership**

Individuals who are not artists, and artists who have at the moment no desire to exhibit abstract work, have become interested in our cooperative effort and have thus brought us to propose an *associate membership*. We shall define this membership briefly as entitling the individual to take part in all cultural, social and educational activities of the group. He may not exhibit, or vote in deciding policies, unless he becomes a full member.

The importance of the associate member rests primarily upon his close intellectual companionship with the artists. He may be an architect, a photographer, a business man, a teacher or a technician. We hope that by reaching him, the production of the actual artist will be better integrated with the needs of present-day society. We are convinced that abstract art clearly announces its function to practical men and women who understand utility as expanding with, rather than reacting against, aesthetic developments.

## OFFICERS

Chairman—Carl R. Holty	65 West 56th Street, New York City
Secretary—Harry Holtzman	231 East 60th Street, New York City
Treasurer—Paul Kelpé	249 West 11th Street, New York City

## EDITORS

Balcomb Greene, Chairman	Ibram Lassaw
Carl R. Holty, <i>ex-officio</i>	Charles G. Shaw
Harry Holtzman	Warren Wheelock

**FOR COPIES** of this book write Paul Kelpé, 249 W. 11 Street, New York City. They are also available at Weyhe's bookstore, 794 Lexington Ave.

Price—50 cents



Postage—10 cents

## ARTICLES

A WORD TO THE OBJECTOR—Charles G. Shaw	I
ON SIMPLIFICATION—Albert Swinden	II
THE QUEST FOR AN ABSTRACT TRADITION— George L. K. Morris	III
TOWARD A DIRECT VISION—Robert Jay Wolff	IV
ATTITUDE AND MEANS—Harry Holtzman	V
CONCERNING PLASTIC SIGNIFICANCE—Alice Mason	VI
THE NEW REALISM—Rosalind Bengelsdorf	VII
ON INVENTING OUR OWN ART—Ibram Lassaw	VIII
NON-OBJECTIVE CREATIVE EXPRESSION—Ralph M. Rosenborg	IX
IN DEFENSE OF ABSTRACT ART—Frederick Kann	X
EXPRESSION AS PRODUCTION—Balcomb Greene	XI

It is repeatedly urged by the anti-abstractist and others of a more or less conventional turn of mind that painting, however able, of the non-representational brand is a comparatively slight affair.

"Lines here, dots there, here a circle, there a square, in one corner a triangle, in another an octagon . . .!!! Mere decoration." And with an impatient shrug, the subject is there and then dismissed.

"Pictures," they insist, returning to their home field, "must *look like* pictures. Pictures must *represent something*." Something preferably familiar, of course; but *something* nonetheless. Circles and squares and ellipses are all very well in their place, they admit; but in a painting, certainly not. Paintings must be *of something*. That the total assemblage of circles and lines may possess all the brilliance and beauty of the most realistic painting does not appear to matter.

The fact of their being "unpicturesque" is sufficient to damn them completely. Indeed, the very absence of the customary, hackneyed type of frame is often sufficient cause for distress among such folk. Naturally they are even more distressed by the presence of a clearly geometric pattern, which to them is not a picture at all and hence not art.

"More like a game than a painting," is yet another favorite critique. And not, in truth, because the geometric pattern is bad in design or lacking in movement or negative in value or possessing neither cohesion nor solidity or crude in colour or without depth or a score of other conceivable attributes. Such objections are never advanced. It is simply because the painting in question is frankly geometric in its purity. It is something off the beaten path, something unfamiliar, and therefore unpicturesque. Because the yellow disc in the left hand corner is not a summer moon caressing a tropic sea but merely an undisguised yellow disc, it fails to evoke that necessary something that summer moons and tropic seas invariably evoke

among such picture lovers. Because slightly to the right of the centre there is a brick-red form that suggests a cross between a tibula and a dog-biscuit, but being neither a tibula nor a dog-biscuit, the necessary something is again unevoked. Because in the very centre there is a solid black rectangle that, try as they will, they cannot identify as a body of water, a pirate flag, a coal mine, a house, a coffin, or indeed anything, they are at once irritated. And because a good third of the painting contains a rich *mattiere* of sand, not only are these good people irritated and unevoked but downright disgusted, as well.

"What does it mean?" they cry, sadly shaking their pates, "what is it all about?"

As if a work of art need necessarily be *about* something. For, alas! the failure to be able to view a thing (indeed *any* thing) objectively is sorrily enough, a practice all too common even amongst those who profess the possession of a detached viewpoint.

"The thing's a monstrosity," they snort, turning away in disdain. "It's not even fit to be hung." Well, perhaps it isn't. But not, at least, for the reasons—or rather, dearth of reasons—given.

For these art, it would seem, lies solely in the conventional, and that which fails to fit into one of convention's well-worn pigeon-holes, however intrinsically plastic, is lost, and lost forever, upon such. Even discarding the question of prettiness (which nine times in ten such folk mistake for beauty) the fact remains that in their blinkered eyes art must rest within the bounds of that which is familiar. This is chiefly due, no doubt, to a prejudice born of habit; *i.e.* the habit of regarding an object without actually seeing it. Plus, of course, the inability to divorce the subject matter from the thing itself. For stripped of sentimental, familiar, or literary garniture, a work of art to only a few remains a work of art. It is not the vital structure, the essentials, that are sought but almost always quite the reverse—in brief, that which matters least.

Another accusation is that abstract art is cold. Again a sorry admission to a love for subject matter. For assuredly the fact of a work being abstract has nothing whatever to do with its coldness or warmth. Structurally it is the same as a representational picture, while obviously the colors employed may be the identical colors. But unaccustomed to pictorial purity, such critics again become confused by the very fact of simplification. And once more we hear the plaintive wail of unpicturesqueness, the confusion arising as usual from that which is truly pictureque (fit to be in a picture—hence plastic) and that which, from any aesthetic standard, remains, once and for all, illustrative.

All of which would indicate that such observers have not merely failed to *see* abstract art but indeed *any* art. For honest painting, regardless of its representational or non-representational merits, embraces certain patent fundamentals. One seeks, for example, rhythm, composition, spacial organization, design, progression of color, and many, many other qualities in any aesthetic work. Indeed it is the perfection of these very qualities that constitute an aesthetic work and there is surely no earthly reason why a painting may not possess all such qualities and still be the most abstract picture ever painted. Art, since its inception, has never depended upon realism. Why, one cannot help wondering, should it begin now? Art, on the contrary, is (has been, and always will be) an appeal to one's *aesthetic emotion* and to one's *aesthetic emotion* alone; not for the fraction of a split second to those vastly more familiar emotions, which are a mixture of sentimentality, prettiness, anecdote, and melodrama.

—Charles G. Shaw

During my first week at the Academy, my instructor, a pupil of Gerome, explained that there were a hundred or more tonal values reflected from the plaster cast I was contemplating. He advised me to reduce this complicated maze of values to two or three.

My instructor's idea of reducing values had nothing but academic aims, but it was a simplification. He would, I am sure, have been quite dismayed if I had reduced the Venus of Milo to two or three rectangles. It seems to me that his original concept, or abstraction, should have enabled him to recognize such a further reduction as consistent, had I so executed it.

What I mean by this is that the abstract method may be understood as a direct concern with the extension of principles used by all the significant artists of the past. What we examine and are affected by in any work of art, past or present, are the relationships expressed in it.

We are moved not only by particular, or individual forms, but by the relationships between the particular forms and their significance as a unity. As for instance, the difference between a figure fixed in a static pose and one in violent movement. Although the particular forms comprising the figure are practically the same in both instances, it is the different disposition, or relationship of these forms that produces the different effects. The particular forms give character and variety to the work; but, unless the particular forms function with relationship to one another, the work will have as little value as any object that functions only in parts but not as a unit. It will be incomplete.

By first limiting oneself greater concentration is made possible, permitting progression to fuller, richer forms. I understand simplification to mean a reduction of forms to an equivalent concept which embraces greater clarity and precision.

—Albert Swinden

Surely the number of roads now open to the artist who would express the contemporary background in addition to his personal quality are becoming few enough. The fields of illustration (with increasing thoroughness ever since the Quattrocento made the way accessible) have been explored to the limits. Little remains today in these directions for any one sensitive to the banality of repetition save the unearthing of novel picturesque districts, geographical or illusory (the exploitation of American local color is the most oppressive at the moment), and even these grow mawkish overnight. Similarly the Surrealists, most of whom had been content to face the new world with a bankrupt plastic language, tediously rehearse the shock of odd juxtaposition which alternately ruffles and fascinates the bourgeoisie. And the technical experimentors (Matisse, Rouault) who had come to us fresh and adventurous, repeat themselves mechanically today.

It was not difficult for any one conversant with the dependence of art history upon the progress of civilization to have foreseen the debacle; the frustration of these surface-attempts at harnessing the fallen tide of art was inevitable. For the process had been repeated before with an almost equal vulgarity (the Romans as they solemnly echoed the plastic language from which Athens had once extracted a genuine eloquence offers the most obvious example.) And now again there are indications of a world transformed by countless basic changes without any shift in the popular aesthetic viewpoint. Most artists, like the public to which they appeal, are content to look about them with eyes alert for Renaissance accessories, or at best they are adjusted to symbols that are Impressionist or Fauve. Occasionally, of course, an original flavor or attitude will assert itself, but never an authentic language that can hold for long.

Against these currents—many of which achieve popularity before they become dated—a continuous opposition may be followed. For

fifty years, through both single and concerted efforts, the basic problems of art have been attacked from the inside. Painters have grown conscious, through their sensibility or a knowledge of past cycles, that the rebirth of an aesthetic voice can take life only after a reorientation of the structural language itself. And some of them—Cezanne, Seurat, and their Cubist heritage—have kept the embers aglow by means of an unerring sense of style that they imparted to their researches. These vital steps have proved a direction, and not as we were once informed, the end of a road and an era. For the roots had not yet sunk to a depth essential for a full-bodied tradition, or even for the continued support of the artists themselves. It is not through chance that the surpassing quality with which Picasso, Braque, and Miro were wont to be so prodigal, should one day fail the summons to their repetitious tasks. Nevertheless, the path has been cleared for later artists who are finding for themselves that they must strip art inward to those very bones from which all cultures take their life. The ground is clear, and it remains for them to construct the foundations anew.

The ancient cultures that seemed at their time, no doubt, to have been forged so easily, present in retrospect the whole long cycle. Our own development is more conscious and hence more prone to pitfalls, but similar structural foundations await us. The course of the progression is obvious. The art of Myron and Phidias, for instance, was anchored fast into the Minoan abstract and semi-abstract researches toward an Indo-European spirit; then, when the accent was fixed through simple vase-forms and funeral objects, the humanistic overtones could be accommodated. Nor was the art of China a spontaneous flowering under the dynasties of Han and Sung; the seeds were planted deep among the wonderful Chou bronzes and even earlier vessels; then, because of their insistence on expressive shape and structure, the later traditions were able to support the outside borrowings from Greek and Hindu.

With the old expressive means exhausted and attempts to revive it buried in a maze of vulgarity and grotesqueries, the time is surely ripe for a complete beginning. The bare expressiveness of shape and position of shape must be pondered anew; the weight of color, the direction of line and angle can be restudied until the roots of primary tactile reaction shall be perceived again. Occasionally in America we have been able to project our own quality; it is on quality that we must insist, for quality can never be counterfeited. Perhaps when we have fixed a genuine accent the artist will again be free to raise his voice and to leave for posterity a conception of our life and being.

—George L. K. Morris

When I paint I am moved by a plastic experience. When I look at the everyday world I experience visual emotions. If I should try to represent what I see I should have to favor one aspect for its plastic possibilities as against another with no such possibilities. In doing this I force the world about me, from which I draw my vitality, into special aspects. My visual contact with it becomes arbitrary and subject to the limitations of my decisions as to what I can and cannot paint. For example, I see the vista of the city with its lights and electric signs moving swiftly through the shifting spaces of night. If to paint is to describe and represent, then I am forced to reject this experience because it will not submit to plastic analysis. This self imposed blindness cuts off the artist from those great visual events which the world is seeing for the first time. He escapes into the security of those restricted aspects of the contemporary world that can still be compressed into the pictorial conception. The artless layman, living in visual freedom, in the end will live a broader visual life than this painter.

The contemporary painter cannot finally combine representation with direct and simple plastics. We cannot call from the past the archaic mind and eye as readily as the archaic form. The eyes of contemporary man see with an inherent microscopic naturalism. He fools himself who thinks he can represent contemporary life and at the same time achieve authentic simplicity by means of a process of elimination. In doing this the painter, above all, eliminates his own real self.

Apply the microscope outside, everywhere and anywhere. It is undeniably ours. Why make an encumbrance of it by first limiting its scope in the name of descriptive art and then throwing out all but the fragments of its findings in the name of simplicity? This is to transform a priceless faculty into an instrument of escape. Let it reveal

its wonders and let us absorb its revelations. But let us not resort to aesthetic hieroglyphics in a desperate effort to give these revelations to "art". Accept the camera. It will do the job easily and beautifully.

We must forget art biases and absorb direct, uncatalogued experience. The painter looks at everything. He rejects nothing. He cannot be visually predisposed for or against. He must not drag into the studio favorite odds and ends of the world outside. His canvas must be another and independent visual experience. In this way only will he achieve a plastic vision that will be of this and not of a bygone world. A direct vision.

—Robert Jay Wolff.

The position and action of the individual artist may be more or less limited by internal and external restrictions. Unless he is a solipsist, the artist will formulate his energy to positive cooperation and not toward the indigent emphasis of mere personal reaction, limitation, or negation.

Considered formally, the means of expression by the artist are limited. It is his cultural responsibility to orient himself toward his means in a positive manner. The artist constructs and exhibits his work; he experiences and expresses literary conceptual relationships; formally or informally he lectures or teaches. The coordination and organization of his positive effort with these means results in a developing intensity of effects. The argument here is for an unequivocal relationship and comprehension of these means. Just as culture interpenetrates and is concatenated, so is the development and action of the means. Despite the multiplicity of human occupations, it appears that expression is of three distinct limits or phases:

- 1—the production of objects;
- 2—the abstraction: concepts and symbols;
- 3—the personal or psycho-physical relationship.

As a matter of physical normality, no one of these phases is separable from the others because they are simultaneous as factorial and reciprocal aspects of reality.

In relation to art, the impasse of the solipsist is expressed as the particularized attitude. The solipsist would have the means become a merely egotistic function. It is characteristic of the particularized attitude to comprehend the object (painting, sculpture, construction) as an individualistic symbol, or as an individual's representation of symbol. This is opposed to the scientific comprehension of the object as a representation of intuitions, perceptions and conceptual relationships, externalized and manifested within the limits of visuo-

spacial means. The particularized attitude is in opposition to the comprehension of the object's significance and function as a tangible utility of universal meaning. While there is no question that the object proceeds from an individual source of identity, it is most important to emphasize that the object isolates itself, is an independent physical reality, impersonal and environmental. It is of qualitative value to us as a unified or equilibrated presentation of spacial relationships.

To the particularized attitude there is a split between content and form, and what in the object is considered as "style" is no more than a form mannerism. For the integrated attitude, content and form are simultaneous; the complete sensibility is expressed through the intuition of the direct use of the means. The object is commensurable, and is in accordance with a corresponding concept of space equilibration and function. The evaluation of an object is always determined by this accordance with a comprehension or concept of the laws that govern quality. It appears that the artist should approach his medium with a consistent comprehension and analysis of these laws.

The sympathetic application of plastic understanding to some complementary cultural purpose is unquestionably valid, i.e.: editorial cartoons, posters, etcetera; so long as there is a need for such statements, they are of function. But it should be understood that the value of such objects, from the viewpoint of a heightening of knowledge is limited to its accordance as an "applied" form. It is essential to make this differentiation.

—Harry Holtzman

During the past two centuries the pleasure in actual materials, paint, stone and so forth was forgone for skill in copying, and a sense of adventure in the use of mediums is completely lacking in the work of the majority of artists of that period. Today a sense of wonder is alive again. The abstract painter finds it, essentially, in his materials, and deals in the magic of textures, colours juxtaposed to force intensities which thus show movement somewhat as the sculptor shapes the air with his constructions. Wonder is in the work again as it was in primitive works of art. The abstract painter builds his canvas without representation or perspective but in relation to the fullest use of the elements of paint that have appeared from time to time throughout the history of art. Some of these elements may be found in the paintings of Cimabue and some of the 16th century Russian ikons, where the whole canvas moves and vibrates with change. Sometimes pure complements are placed together, but more often use is made of what might be called a shift of key, a sliding away from the obvious complement to a more intricate vibration affecting every colour in the picture. In the large painting of the Madonna by Cimabue, in the Uffizi gallery in Florence, this use of color is carried into the field of represented movement. Due to the flashing changes of tone and hue, the wings of the angels appear to flutter; this is an entirely different aim from that of the abstract painter for whom descriptions and similes only detract from the importance of that which is actually happening, in this case namely the vibration or movement achieved, the position of those passages on the canvas, their relation to other colour and masses in the painting, the sense of every part bearing its proper stress.

For the abstract artist the field of painting is too great to be bound to any literary content and this is why he breaks with the past and looks into a new experimental world. Free from

representational limits, he is able to explore more fully the potential factors within his medium; evidence of these factors has appeared at various times in every branch of art. They show clearly in the early Negro wood sculpture where quality, weight, texture and the peculiar characteristics of the wood determined the form and aroused the sculptor to new plastic and textural invention; and the pleasure the artist felt in working the wood is directly communicable. This is also true of the way the Archaic Greeks handled their media. At Ravenna there are heavy Byzantine mosaics whose relentless black lines sweep the processions of figures up the nave of the church to the huge mosaic Christ. The use of gold in the backgrounds is almost an abstraction of colour, being unrelated to nature and working well with the stylized lines of the figures. These and countless other achievements of the past are the things we build on and stem from; they are the indications of what may be done when an artist is fully aware and alive to the possibilities within his reach. Today we are free of the limitations these artists knew, we also have many new materials to work with; it is a period of vigorous experimentation.

And here I would like to clarify the apparent confusion that many people seem to experience in regard to abstract art and that of the surrealists. Herbert Read makes the statement in his book *Surrealism* that: "Just as curiosity is the faculty which dares man to seek without the external universe . . . so wonder is the faculty which dares man to create that which has not before existed." Certainly this is true; the surrealists, however, still use their materials as props for narrative; they find a source of wonder in dreams, in automatism and in the subconscious, and depict this feeling academically by the extraordinary placing of objects and the unusual scale of them. Not working plastically, they seek to record such things as nostalgia, dreamlike fancies and incongruous shapes that have no part at all with abstract art. We look for nothing mystical or dreamlike but the magic in the work itself. Abstract art demands an awareness of the intrinsic use of materials and a fuller employment of these means which build a new imaginative world by using them for their own potential worth.

—Alice Mason

For years, the word abstract has served as a misnomer for a particular viewpoint in painting. It has set up a strong barrier between the spectator and a true understanding of the art it would describe. I prefer to call this form of painting the "New Realism", a term I consider adequate for so direct an approach to nature.

The difference between the art of the past and that of the present lies primarily in purpose. The prevalent desire of artists heretofore (with certain exceptions), has been to describe that which the eye mechanically records of its environment. Today, however, I believe the problem of the artist is to describe not only what he sees but also what he knows of the natural internal function of each object he encounters. With vision made keener by such knowledge, his canvas becomes a more direct account of reality.

All creative conception has been, in my opinion, an effort of the artist to relate his experience in terms of his medium. It is generally understood that experience denotes that which one sees, feels and learns from one's surroundings. The abstract painter is also attempting to tell that which he experiences and understands of nature and of his medium. His conceptions are built upon concrete manifestations of reality. By studying nature zealously, he tears it apart to see what makes it live, and having learned, reorganizes the parts into a new creation. He is concerned with every object and its environment. He sees the different planes that make the object and the spaces. He knows that the space generally regarded as empty and void is concrete; that it has form, solidity, and planes to bind it. He indicates on his canvas that the surrounding spaces makes the object, as the object makes the spaces; that all the planes creating an object are separate and different, because each belongs to a distinct environment.

The artist senses that by tearing the planes of an object apart, he creates more space, more activity within and outside this form. He

realizes the two-dimensional quality of his canvas and endeavors to create the illusion of three dimensions without destroying that two-dimensional surface. He tries to account for every plane in his subject. He observes with precision the laws of movement, relativity and design. He encourages the imagination that can conceive a relation of shapes and colors utterly unique, coherent, fluid, and flexible.

His painting expresses the love of life, the form and color of life—a vibrating response to its powerful energy. Here one faces the primitive, emotional brutality of man integrated with a sensitive mind that sees sooner than the eye.

The unit of the picture plane is a living reality consisting of active pigments and that intensely vital force: the energy of the human brain. The picture plane does not represent a bottle as a bottle, nor any other subject in its own terms, but in the terms of the artist's plastic conception. The moment one puts together materials of different nature and substance than the bottle contains, one is creating a new unit, a thing in itself. The shapes that compose the picture belong to nothing else but the picture. There is no other story than its own story—the tale of form related to other form.

To make this form-drama function as a natural phenomenon, as an experience, one must observe the laws of energy that govern all matter: the opposition, tension, interrelation, combination and destruction of planes in space.

It is the era of science and the machine. Science has enabled us to clearly recognize generative forces. The machine guided us to a logical combination of simplicity and functionalism. So-called abstract painting is the expression in art of this age. The abstract painter coordinates his emotional temptations with his reason: the reason of this age.

To recognize the fundamental drama of the abstract painting is to acknowledge all that lives. To investigate the abstract painting is to study the laws of nature.

Our present civilization is caught in the maelstrom of economic disorder and changing standards. An intense need for constructive thought predominates. The message of abstract painting, when utilized to serve this need, will be found to ring in accord with the life concepts of those great economists whose prophecies and plans are being notably fulfilled.

The abstract painter anticipates the time when every man will be better able to enjoy the fruits of culture and the progress of human thought.

—Rosalind Bengelsdorf

The contemporary artist who works in the various plastic media is becoming aware of the unlimited and hitherto undreamed of possibilities in art. In order to penetrate this vast new world we must abandon most of the traditional experiences. The significant art expression of the various cultures in the history of man is greatly appreciated by the artist and interested layman; nevertheless the present day artist must, in a sense, work as though the art of the past has never existed; as though we invented art.

The crystallized concepts of the terms "sculpture" and "painting" are dissolving. It has always been considered a function of these plastic arts to describe appearances of people, houses, historical and religious events and subjects, and almost all scenes occurring in the life of man. Up till now narration has also been considered a necessary and integral part of art expression.

Until the invention of printing on a mass scale, and the development of photography, painting and sculpture were the only means of conveying ideas (outside of speech) to the millions of people who were completely illiterate. Now photography and the cinema have been brought to such a high state of perfection that painting cannot hope to compete with them in either description or story telling. Stripped of these superimposed tasks, the underlying structure of art becomes clear. Colors and forms alone have a greater power to move man emotionally and psychologically. It becomes more and more apparent that art has something more and something much greater to offer.

In view of these developments, artists are beginning to realize the limitations of time-honored laws of art, so-called, and even the various media. It seems that each of the many cultures of the past had grown and developed an art expression peculiar to itself. Our own age, in some ways so completely different from all past times and at the

same time so eclectic of our heritage, is now forming a new viewpoint of art.

Many people are now learning that we cannot produce an art of our own by continuing to borrow styles and ways of working that came from such different physical, philosophical and psychological world environments as the past shows. It is like trying to transplant a tree after tearing it out of the soil without its roots.

Certain artists have abandoned traditional pigment painting and solid, static sculpture. They feel that the important thing for art is to be alive, to be full of suggestion and possibilities, to enlarge our sensibility and to intensify experience. They are experimenting in the great fields opened up by the growth of modern physics, electricity and machinery and are influenced by the recent discoveries in psychology and psychoanalysis. In these searches our baggage of traditional values is a hindrance. "Facts long amassed, patiently juxtaposed, avariciously preserved, are suspect. They bear the stigma of prudence, of conformism, of constancy, of slowness," writes Gaston Bachelard.

The new attitude that is being formed as a result of these searches is concerned with the invention of objects affecting man psychologically by means of physical phenomena. It is a new form of magic. The artist no longer feels that he is "representing reality", he is actually making reality. Direct sensual experience is more real than living in the midst of symbols, slogans, worn-out plots, clichés—more real than political-oratorical art. Reality is something stranger and greater than merely photographic rendering can show. Jean Cocteau has very aptly said in his film *Le Sang d'un Poete*: "A plaster cast is exactly like the original except in everything." We must make originals. All aesthetic phenomena produced by artists belong to the field of art, whether they fit into the former concepts and definitions or not. A work of art must work.

—Ibram Lassaw

In the field of creative effort we can begin with Ourselves. We create our effort to live our lives soundly. We create our effort to live our lives righteously. In whatever effort we create, we create from the world pattern. It necessarily is our personal creation, inasmuch as we honor our stock-pattern in adjustment to ourselves. It is that which is unoriginal within the scope of human experience. But it is sound and rational. If you are concerned with manufacture, you will create your effort on structurally sound business technique. And so, by example, endlessly through the range and breadth of human endeavor, structurally sound principles will govern and identify themselves.

It is within the realm of our circle of experience that all, or most, of us stop. Our identity to ourselves is at once certain and positive. We need only contemplate that which we do, hold ourselves in relation to our objectivity, and admire or criticize our accomplishments on the basis of that which we admire, or that which has preceded us. It is the personal performance and our relation to that performance which means our pattern of life.

Within the realm of conscious experience, it may happen that some of us shall find dissatisfaction or discontent or distrust or other similar discrepancies in our search for self-identification. It is at that period when man searches beyond. He has contemplated and completed his circle of experience, and must, for want of other points of departure, align and resign himself to the non-objective point of view in matters of his personal expression in and of, life. Here is our beginning of a search for that which is unforeseen, yet formidably present.

The creative artist, producing with line and color shall see that his heart and his mind and his blood can function and dictate as a concentrated or orchestrated whole. It is no longer self-identity or personal performance, but rather, a contribution to objectivity within

itself. The creation of what we believe to be lifeless forms, as we see it today in what is loosely called abstract art, is neither lifeless nor abstract. Judgment should be confined to its contribution to Art and Life, as a product of enrichment to human experience and its subsequent social significance as a contribution to the advancement of our generation.

—Ralph M. Rosenborg

The fact that a new mode of art expression has become more strongly established, that neither heated contradictory discussions nor any available means can stop its natural growth, is sufficient proof of its vitality. Long enough have artists submitted to pretensions of public opinion and lost more or less the respect of a public that has tried to deny them the right of liberation.

The Renaissance has solved the problems of visible space which previous periods had disregarded, and today we even find many conservative artists who again violate the long sacred laws—a proof that the aspired achievement of spacial representation is not the end of all and that new problems are awaiting the artist of today to make his contribution worthy of our time.

It is only too obvious that nature does not stand still; neither can art. Studying nature and previous art periods has sharpened our sensibility and skill, but we can hardly surpass the masters of the Renaissance. With all of our skill we can reachieve but little by changing subject matter or replacing the Renaissance world with the one of our time and thereby giving our works so-called local color.

What shall we do? Are we going to stop right here and keep on trying to repeat ourselves forever? Since 1910 the liberating movement seems to accelerate, when with Cubism in France the new era began to dawn and Dadaism threw the monkey wrench in the old machinery. Cezanne became the signpost that indicated the new road to take. The mechanics of volume were studied and with them one began to speak of "pure creation." The artist had taken the bold step and transgressed the stage of imitating, not aiming any longer to speak to the memory of the onlooker. He felt a new law, new capacities. He realized that nature is not only the sensual perception of distance, but the intelligent penetration of its interior working process. He did not deny the order of the sensible world around us, but ap-

proached it nearer than before and for this reason became even more naturalistic. Copying or imitating natural creations or the usual objects of fabrication proves today of less sensibility than the creation of still unknown organisms, which is based upon the knowledge of nature's mysterious laws.

The consciousness of the artist who wants to portray our present culture refuses to conceive nature only by its outer appearance, by the rhythm that enlivens space, but by searching to portray its static organism.

It is the urge to become united more closely with life of which we form a part, to act as life itself—to become creators rather than imitators. "Trying to let the ocean enter the drop" (Ouspansky), and to find liberation from old rituals and ceremonies, refusing to submit to traditions and authorities; adhering to nothing of the old except to the mysteries of the eternal laws of rhythm and harmonies and becoming aware of one's own creative faculty.

Slowly the die-hards will have to surrender as they have done so many times before when they realized that the gigantic flow of evolution cannot be stopped. Then they will realize the significance of pure creation which is to give matter new forms and not an intellectual appreciation of appearances. In other words, that abstract art is not trying to imitate nature's expressions but to imitate nature's working process.

—Frederick Kann

The problem for large social groups whose individuals have something to say is to get this something said without compromising the group by sharp personal statements which lead to destructive action, and yet without hampering the individual to the extent of making his expression feeble. In the present day this becomes the crucial issue in expression.

In political society that sort of purpose is more and more "pragmatically achieved" by the leader who secures a faction to support him, censors "individualistic" opposition, and then stages an "election". This can be done by leading in Wotan tricked out in a tiny moustache and an Austrian accent, or by flourishing the insignia of the Caesars while we embark for art and culture to Ethiopia.

Leaders with more perspective on both nationalist and class issues, and animated by theoretical considerations which rank distribution on a par with production, make a similar error in their administration of the arts. The "official" Marxist sees art as an instrument for equalizing the *distribution* of wealth, but reluctantly as a *production* valid in itself—an interpretation falling particularly short of the abstract art which has begun by clarifying the applied arts of architecture, poster and typographical design, furniture and even machine construction. He demands an art quickly comprehensible to the masses which will bolster up sales for a society which admittedly requires a generation of dictators for its realization. Such opportunism is pragmatism with an itch, the soap-box speaking instead of the man. From this rostrum Picasso, honored for his cruel venture into Guernica, is presented as a man renouncing individualism.

It is in this world of shaded pragmatisms that the artist must work out his values. His central difficulty is clear. Assuming he has the tenacity to turn out his number of canvases, what besides his studio integrity and his ideal has he to keep his work from becoming a

mere brush service to his independence? What stimulation?

The stimulus of the revolutionist is uniquely his. It should be clear that the organized political revolutionisms of today, whatever their aims, are orthodox beyond precedent, at once military and monastic. The enrolled member whose perception varies ever so little is by gunfire or flag waving obliterated. The individual who is a skeptic is of no account, for the mountains he has historically assailed are abandoned for tunnels into which timid men crowd for mystification. The Church cannot be arrogant, the State only pretends to be. For arrogance or for independence one must seek, as at all chaotic moments, in the individual.

Strangely enough, this is the source in which modern art has equipped the abstractionist to seek. At last unable to scandalize by his sin of non-objectivity, unable to play upon national or racial or class prejudices, and unassisted by the manipulators whose need for profit makes successes easy, his appeal is directly to a following which must make its judgments privately. The substance of the actual paintings and constructions may be approached for the first time in an almost appropriate atmosphere.

It becomes a necessary creed of the competent painter who thinks to view himself as a liberal—to take a long view while others count hours, to risk his individuality for its permanence while others weigh gestures and tactics, to anchor himself always in pigments which will not fade while others hitch themselves to a pragmatism which may whip up a new tune tomorrow.

At a transitional moment in history when the masses blindly follow leaders whose banners are nationalism, but whose only possible sustenance is in the internationalisms of greed or class interest, the independent thinker and moulder of values achieves both neglect and potential power. Private finance is supreme over state boundaries, shifts them at will, calculates for an accumulation which is in no way national. Men of science and literature, however colloquial in their personal impulses, place their power upon the international exchange. Abstract art arrives as the first international language of the brush.

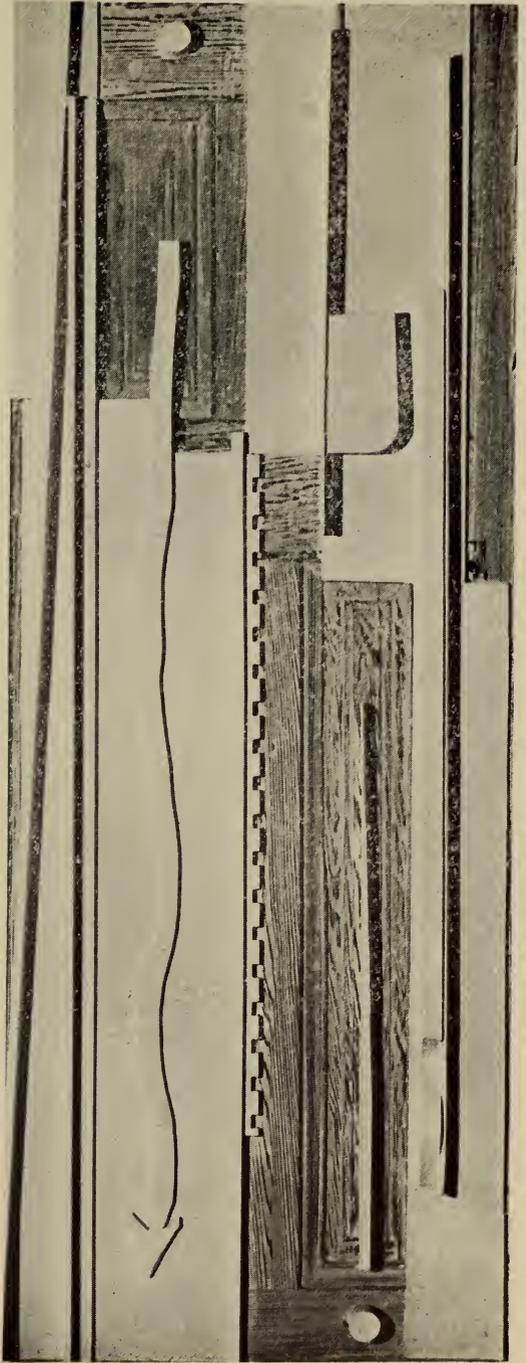
Certain analogies make this clearer. The functionalism of the applied arts such as architectural and furniture design, threatened by the easy revenues which reward a cheap "modernistic" version of the real thing, finds its safeguard in the exigencies of machine and mass production. The functional reorganization of society beyond capitalism, impeded by individuals' vested interests, and postponed by nationalist considerations, seems further to wait upon that historically scheduled collapse of abortive efforts—efforts which indulge

meanwhile in punitive expeditions against the "intellectual". One question in both these cases what can be gained by any eloquent appeals to the individual.

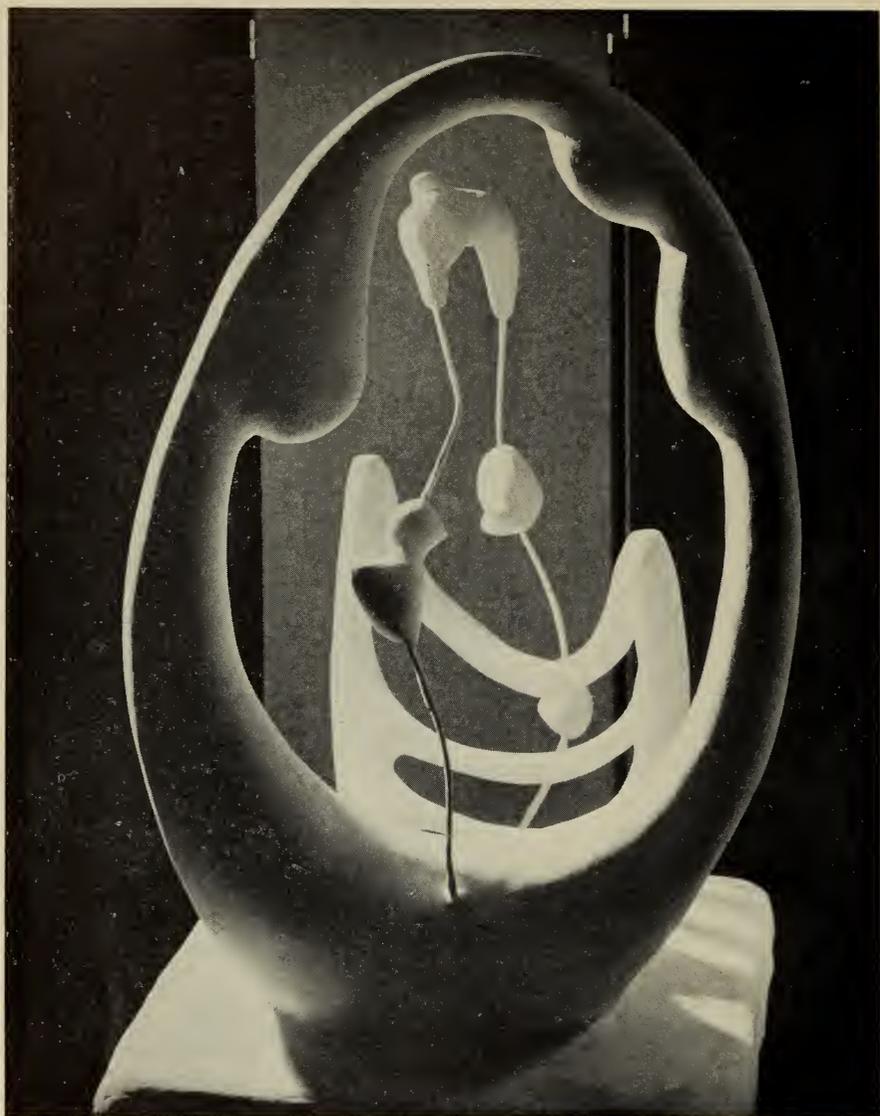
It is actually the artist, and only he, who is equipped for approaching the individual directly. The abstract artist can approach man through the most immediate of aesthetic experiences, touching below consciousness and the veneer of attitudes, contacting the whole ego rather than the ego on the defensive. There is nothing in his amorphous and geometric forms, and nothing within the unconscious or within memory from which he improvises, which is deceptive. The experience is under its own auspices. To whatever extent it helps reconstruct the individual by enabling him to relive important experiences in his past—to that extent it prevents any outward retrogression.

—Balcomb Greene

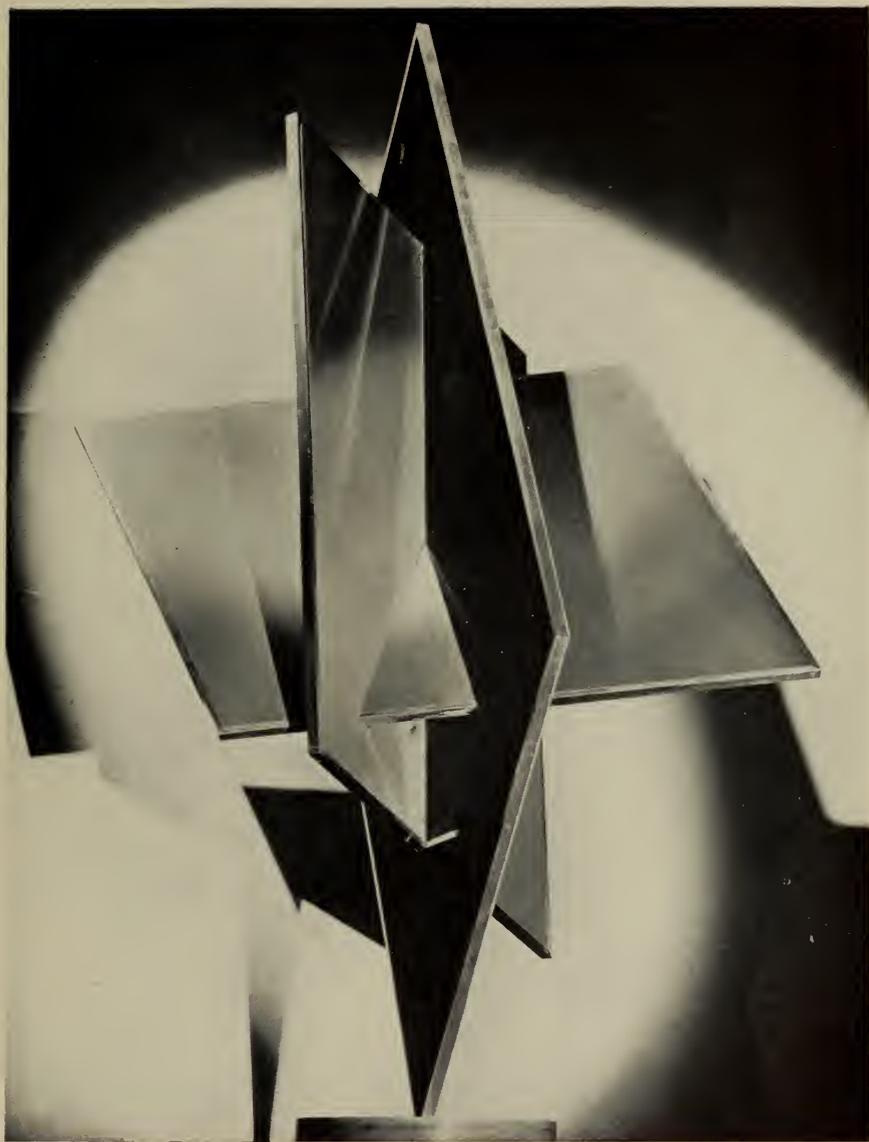




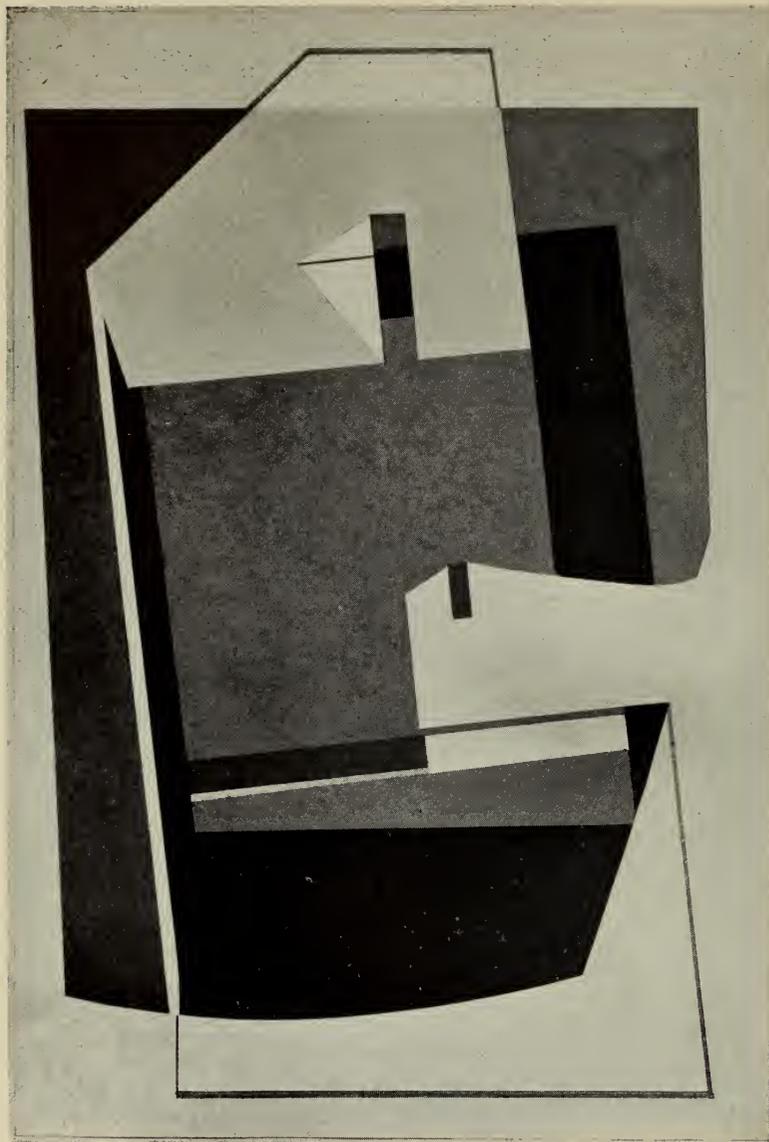
BECKFORD YOUNG:  
CONSTRUCTION



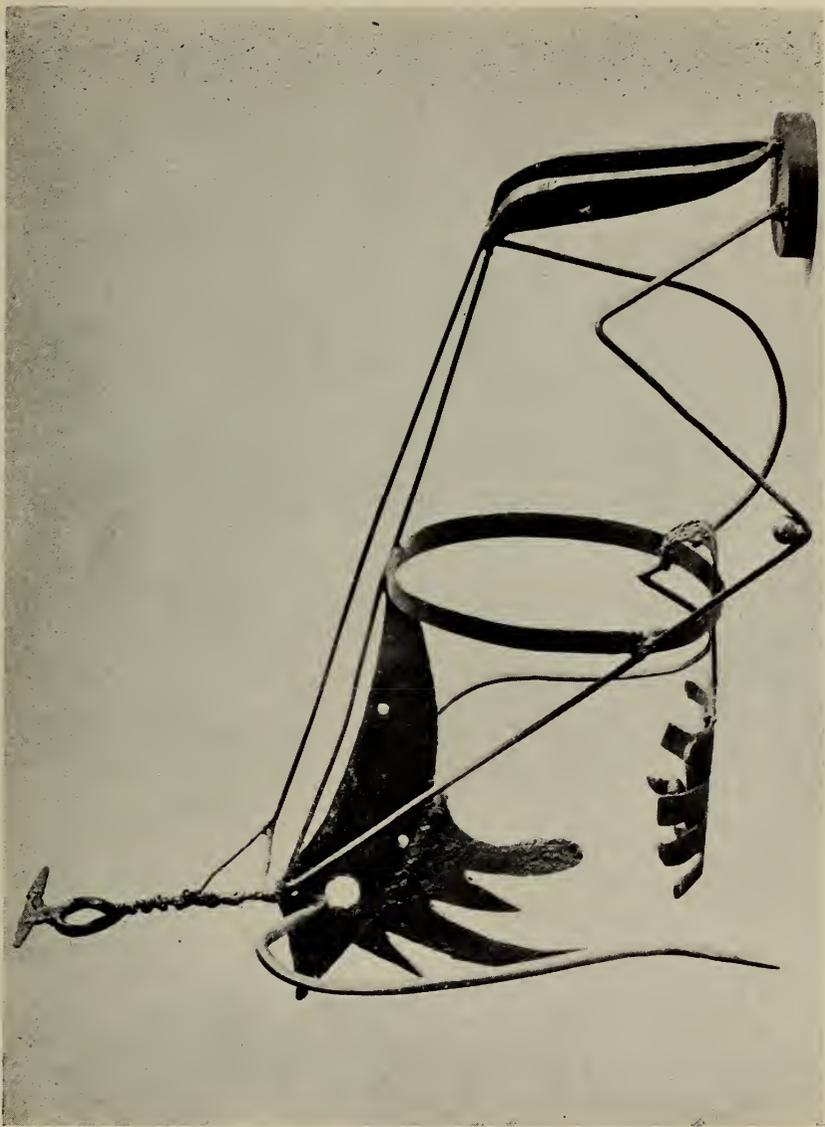
LASSAW: SCULPTURE



KANN: CONSTRUCTION



BALCOMB GREENE:  
COLLAGE



SMITH: SCULPTURE



EMANUEL: SCULPTURE



WHELOCK: SCULPTURE

COHEN: PAINTING

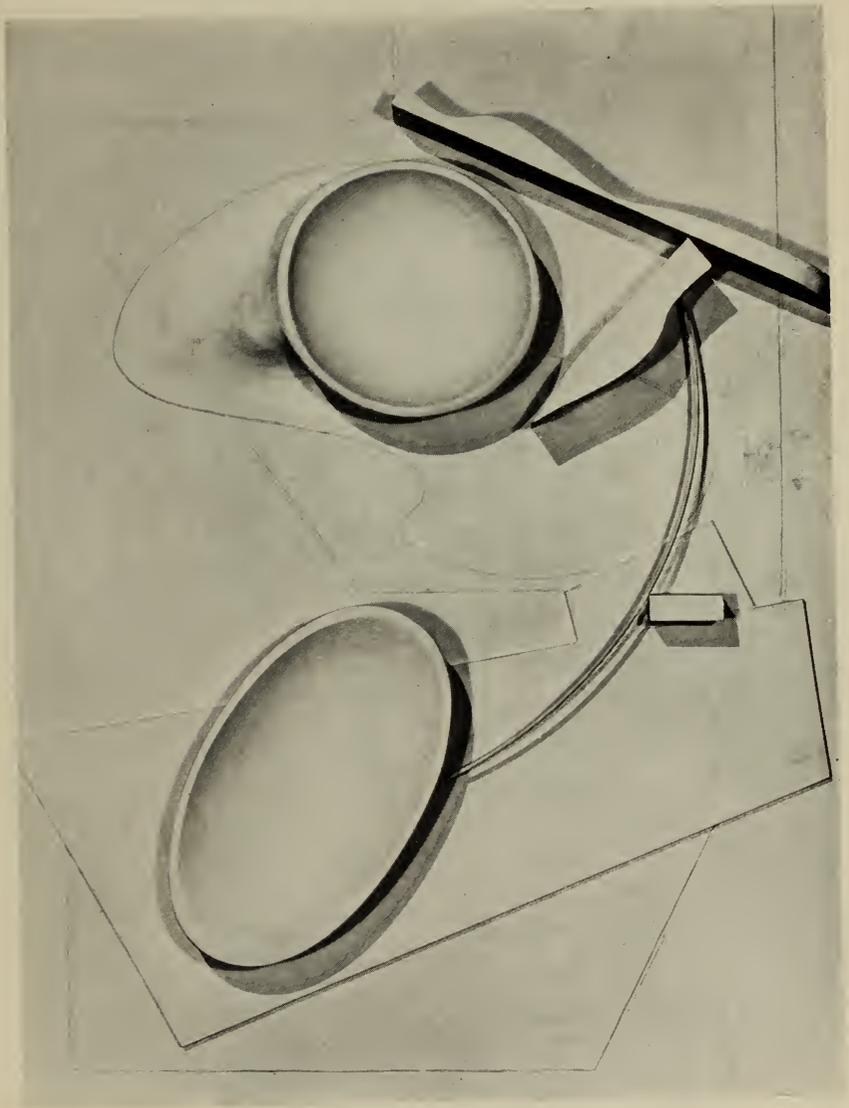




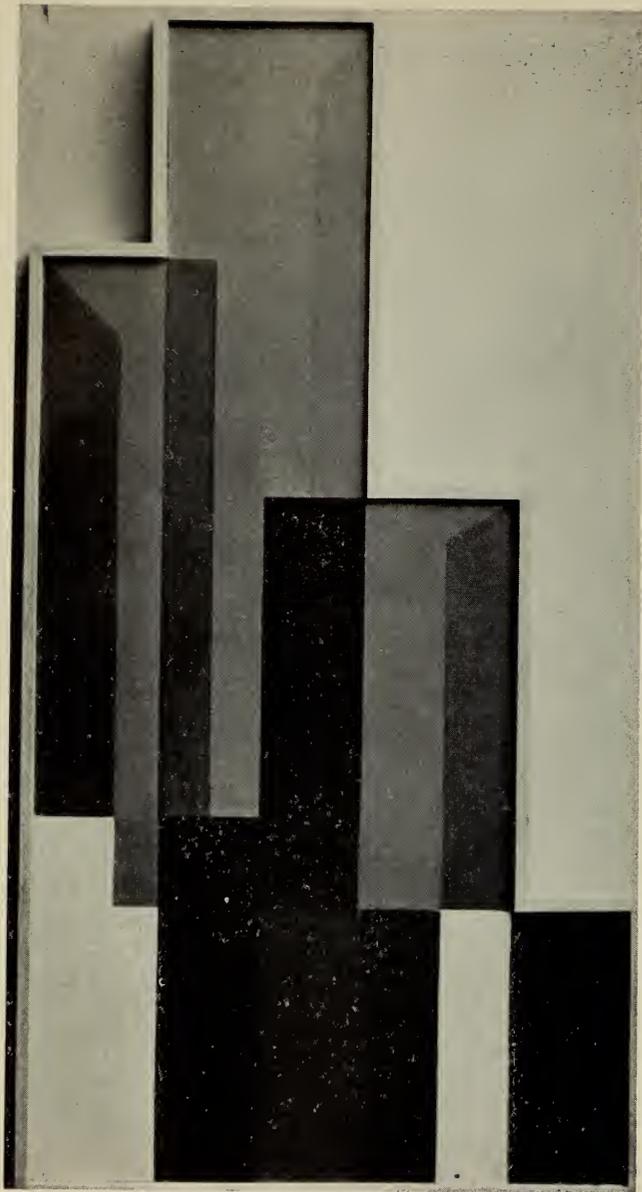
CHRISTIE: PAINTING

BOLOTOWSKY:  
PAINTING

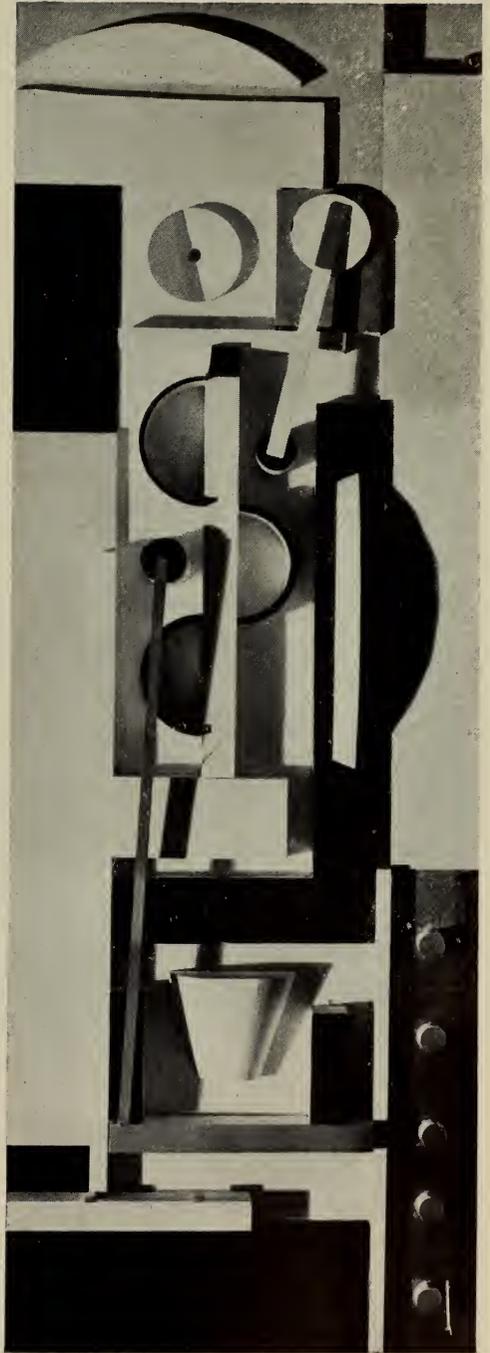




BROWNE:  
CONSTRUCTION



SHAW: CONSTRUCTION



VYTLACIL: CONSTRUCTION

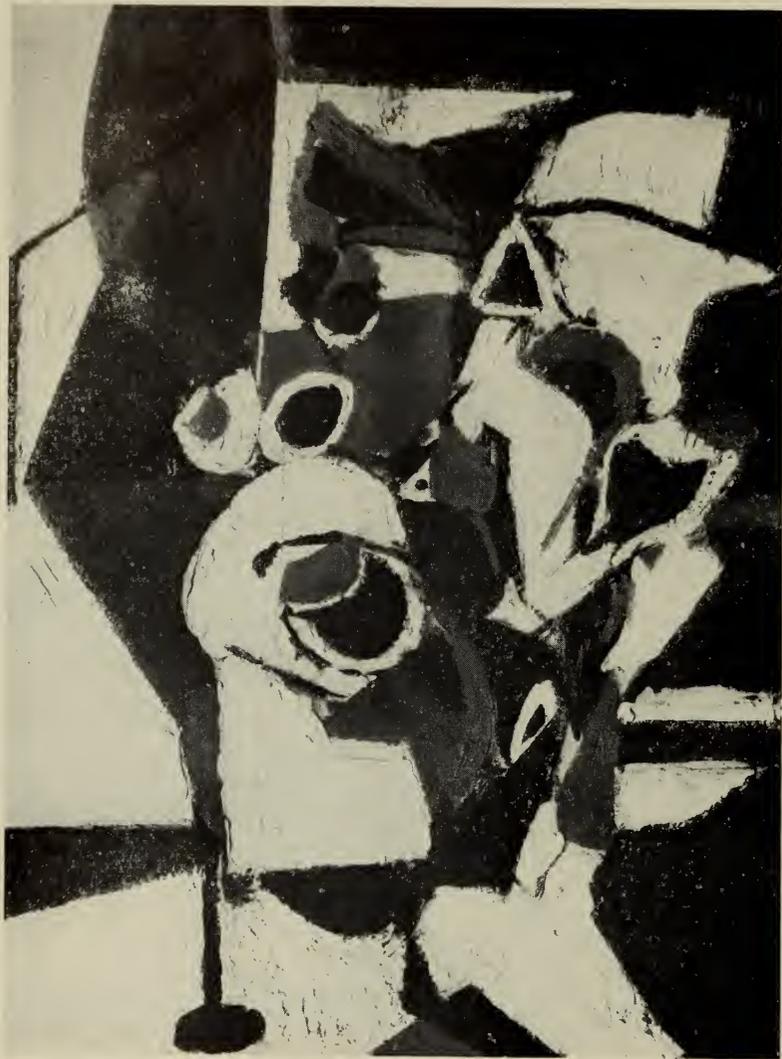
LANCES: PHOTOGRAM





KAISER: PAINTING

CARLES: PAINTING



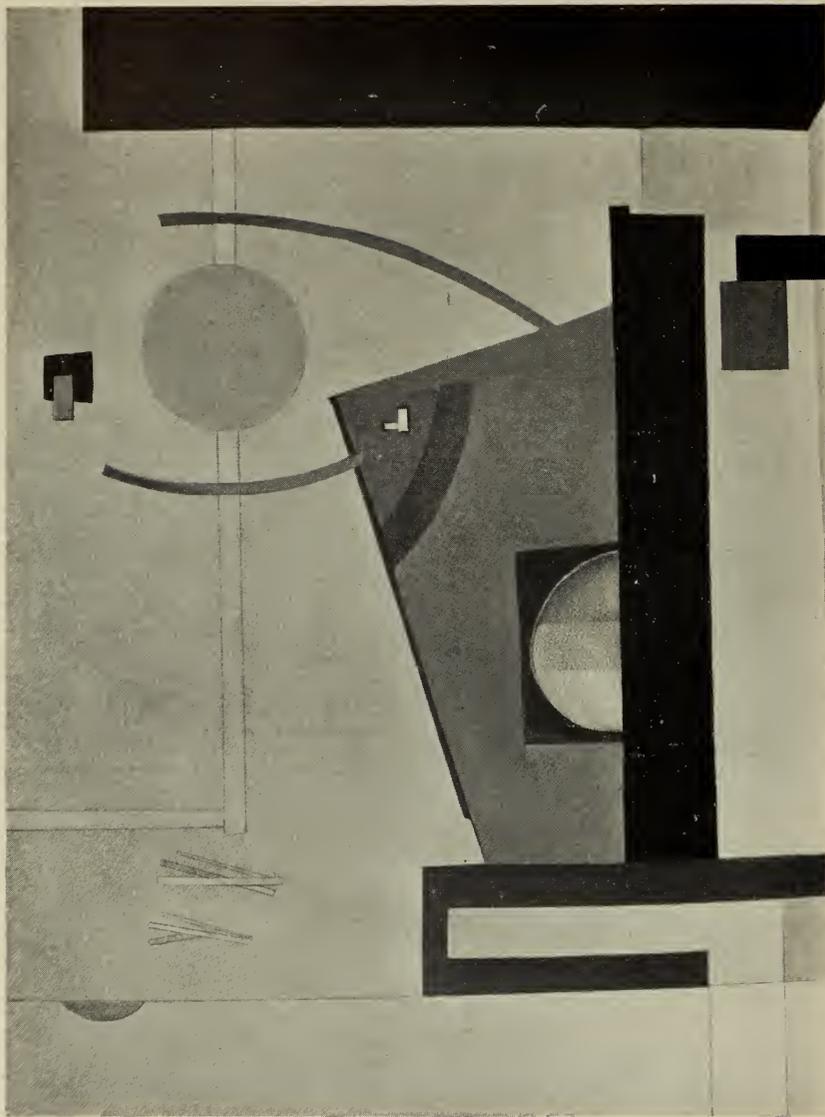


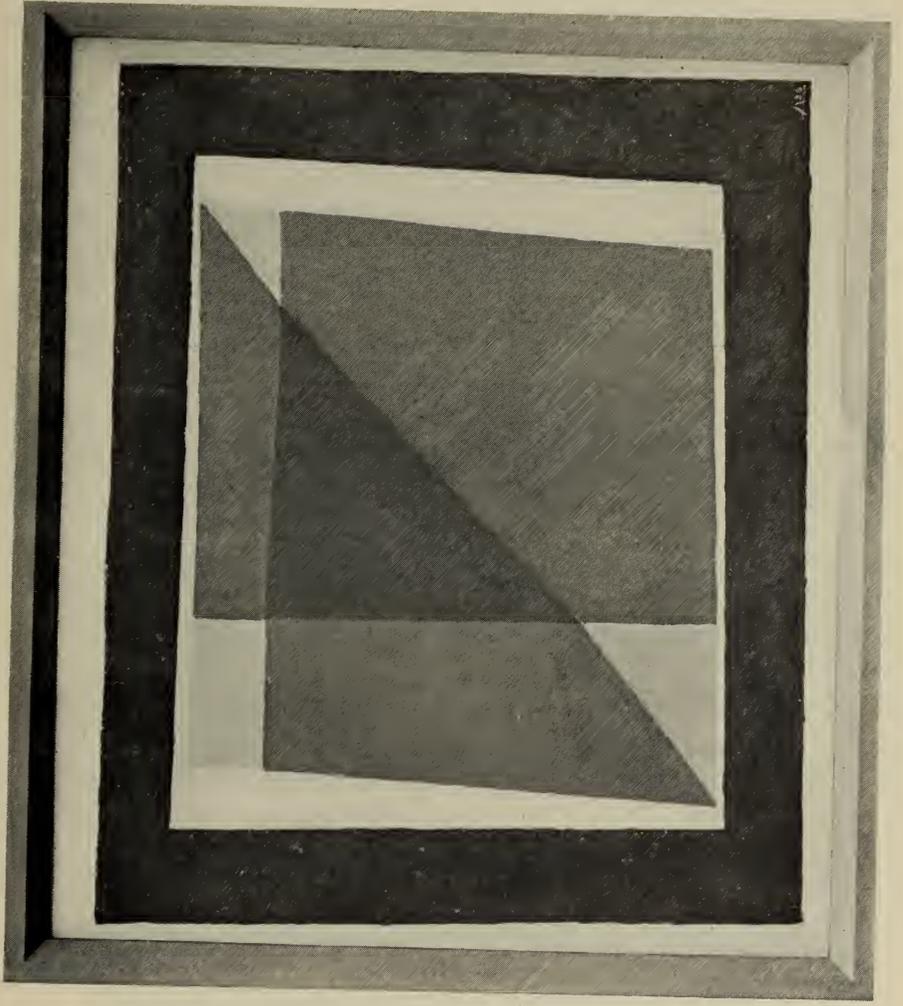
Applied for  
scholarship

WOLFF:  
GOUACHE

GLARNER:  
PAINTING

rephew  
of  
Povolutyky





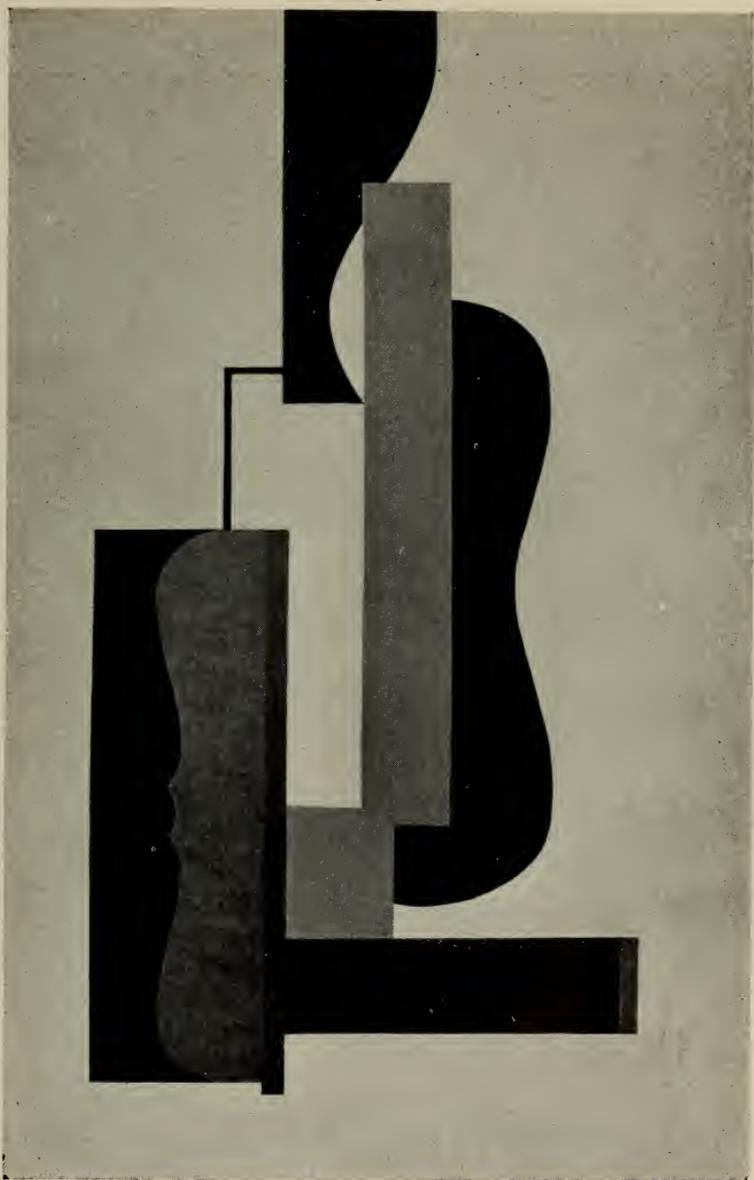
Thomas  
Barban &  
Propriet  
Jan Albers  
1935  
Cabrera College

ALBERS: PAINTING



GERTRUDE GREENE: CONSTRUCTION

very good / in  
color  
special



GALLATIN: PAINTING



LYALL:  
PAINTING

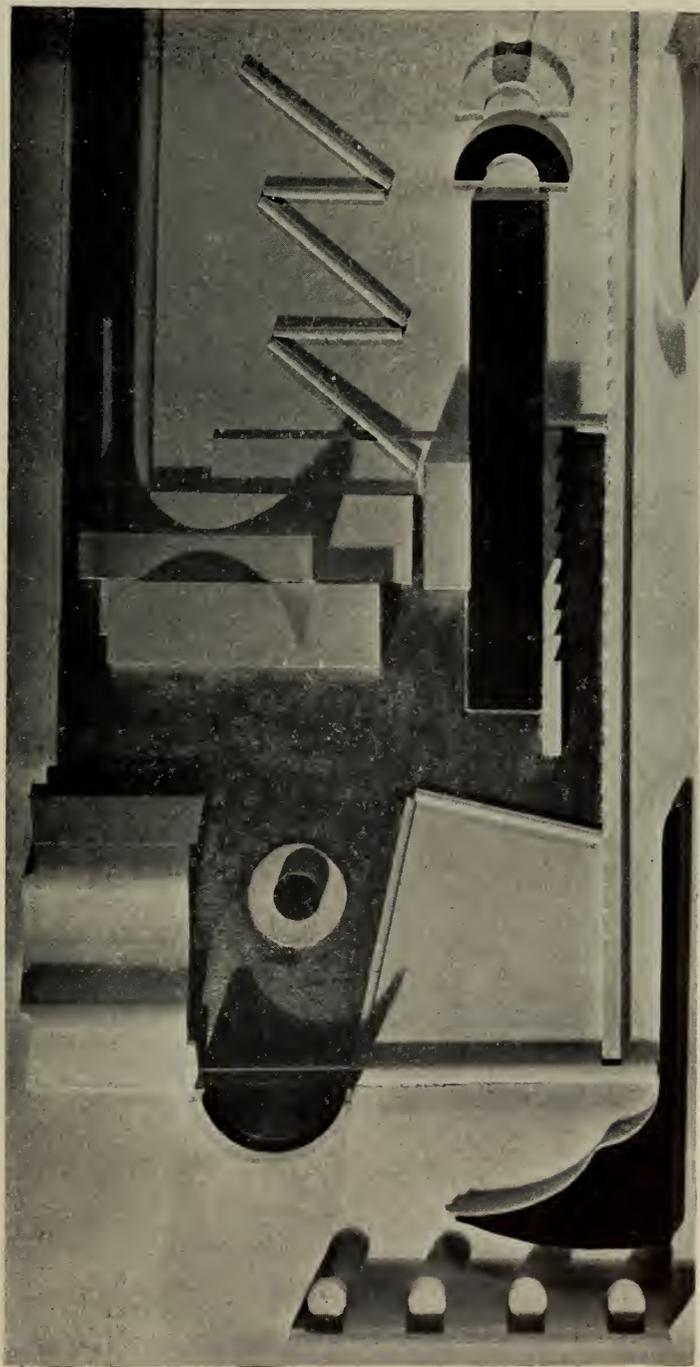


SWIFT: MARBLE INSET

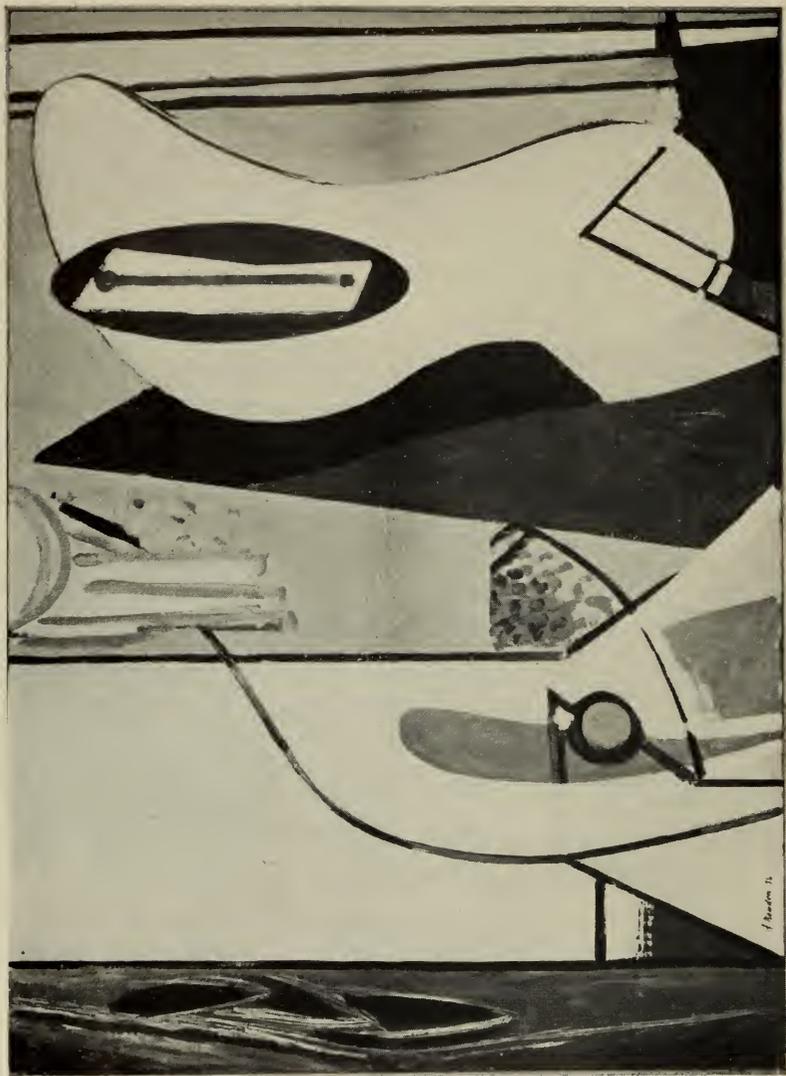


SLOBODKINA: PAINTING

JANET YOUNG: CONSTRUCTION



BOWDEN: PAINTING





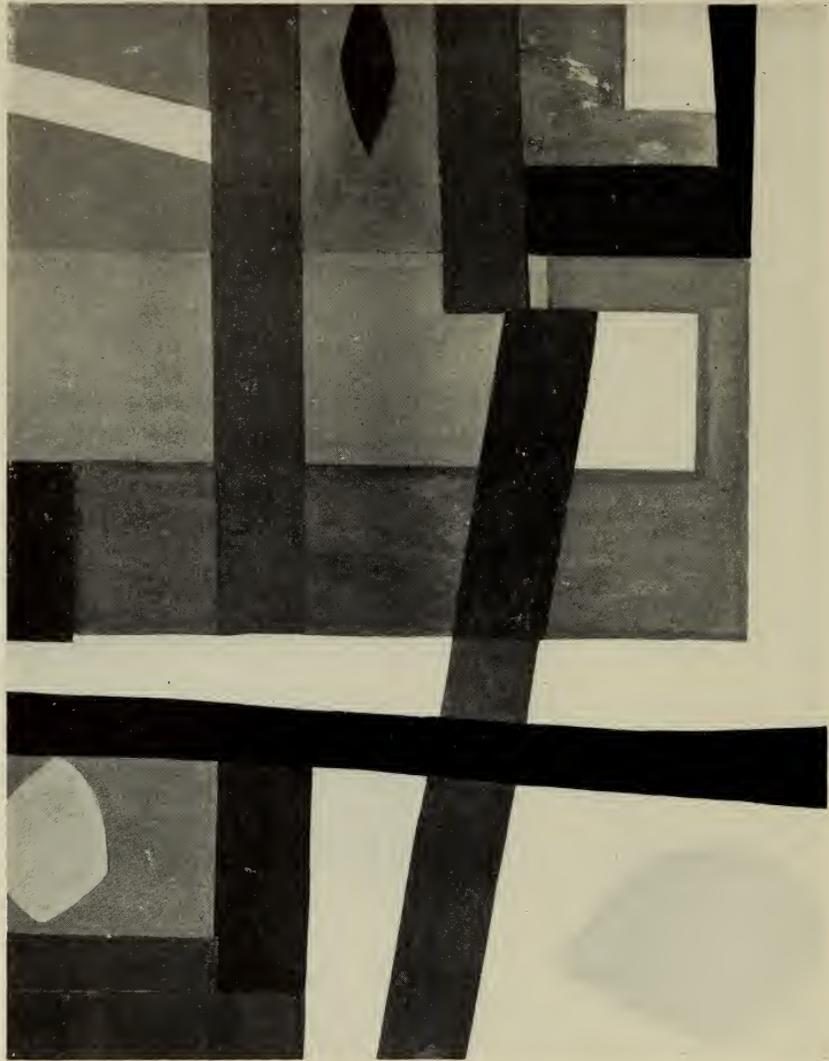
BENGELSDORF:  
PAINTING



MORRIS: SCULPTURE



DREWES: PAINTING



McNEIL: PAINTING

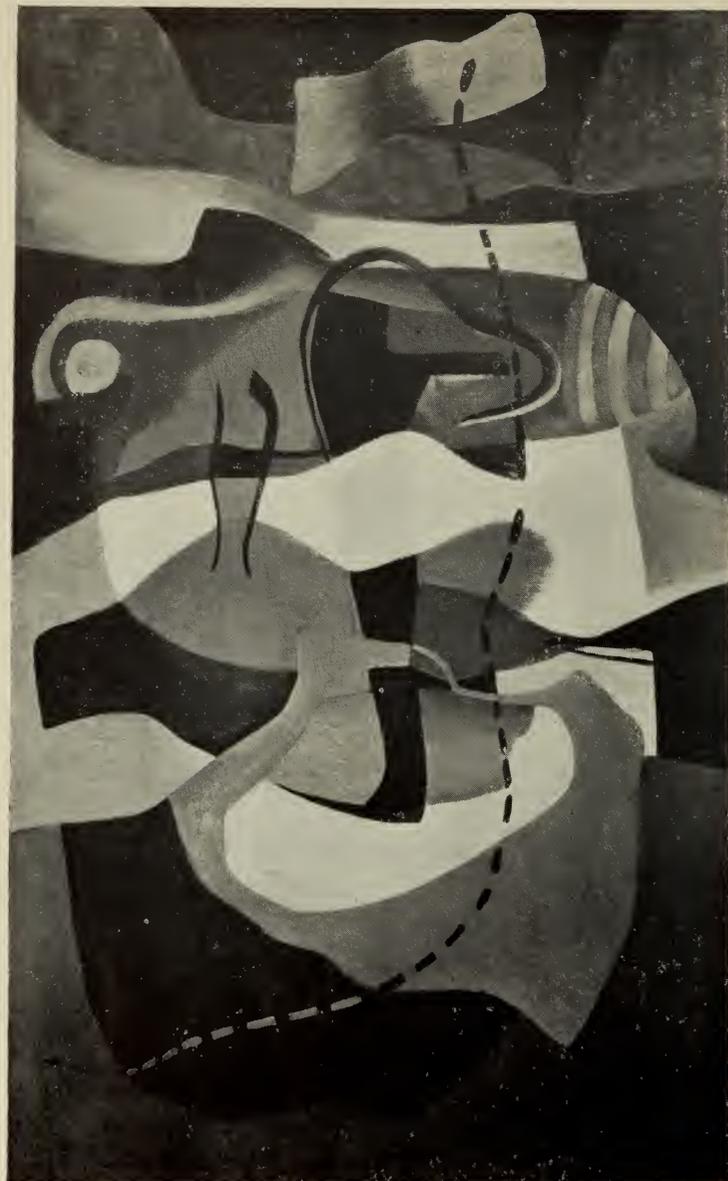


MASON: PAINTING





ROSENBORG:  
WATERCOLOUR



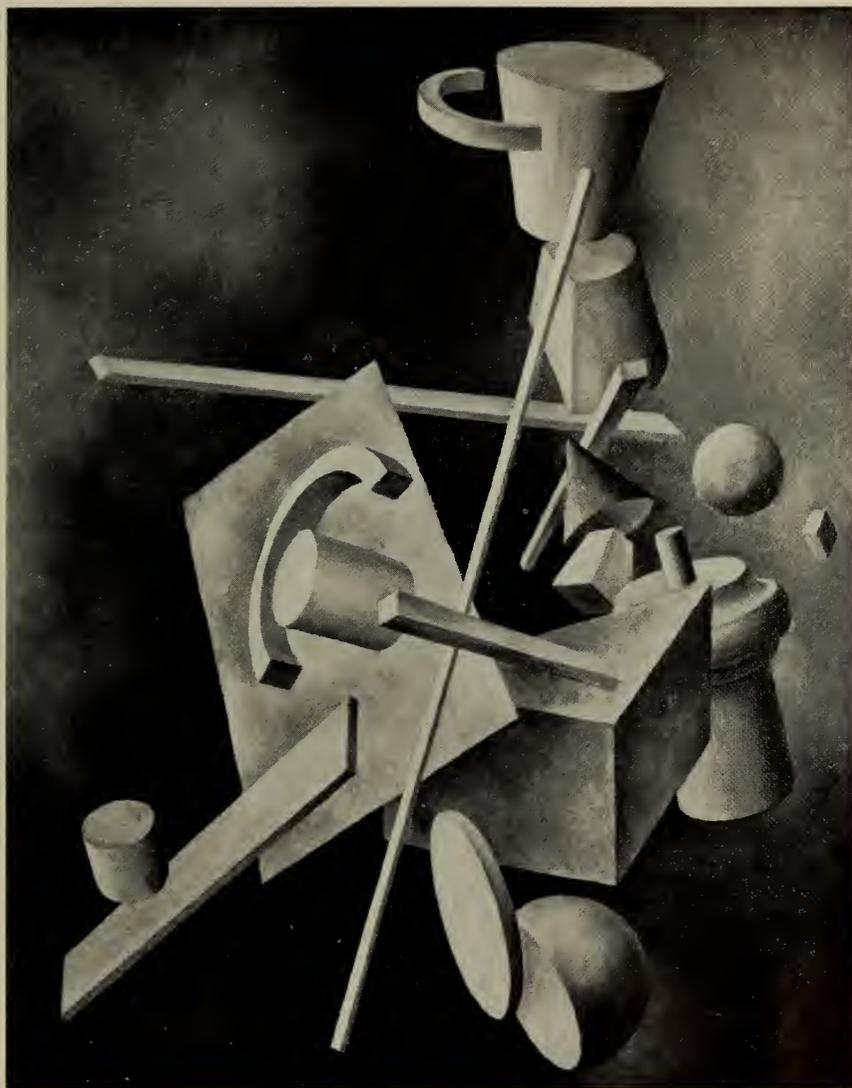
TURNBULL:  
PAINTING



HOLTY:  
PAINTING



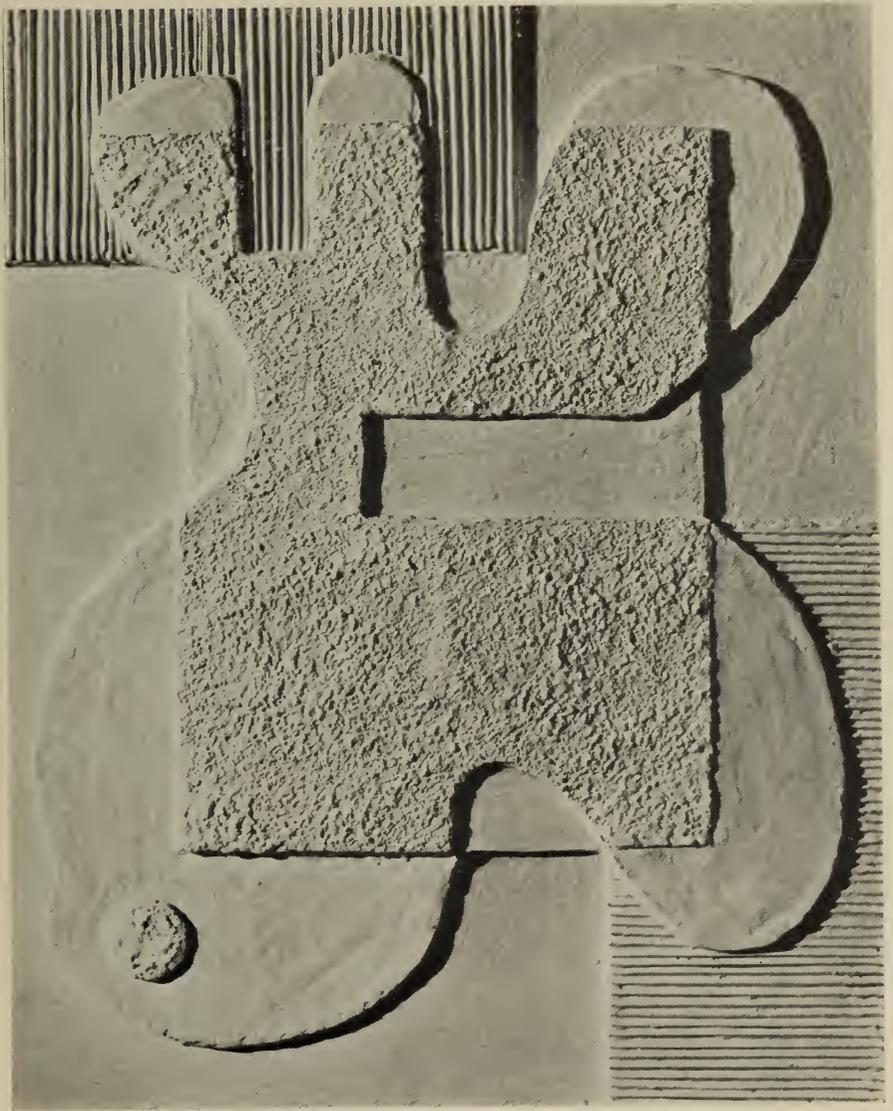
FRELINGHUYSEN: PAPIER COLLE



KELPE: PAINTING



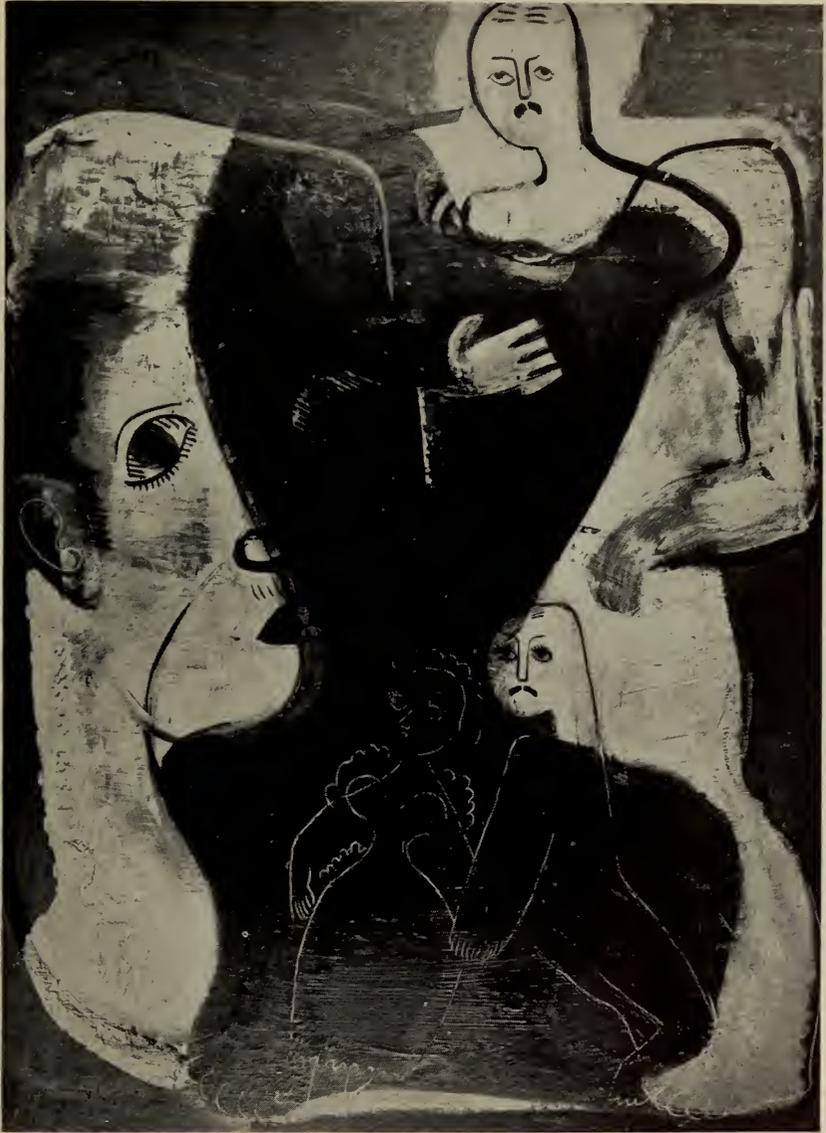
SWINDEN: PAINTING



JORALEMON: RELIEF



SCHANKER: PAINTING



PETERSON: PAINTING



ZOGBAUM: PAINTING



CAVALLON: PAINTING



WEISENBORN: PAINTING





WILDENBERG: PAINTING

WHITEMAN: PAINTING







**VALENTINE GALLERY**

**MODERN ART**

**16 EAST 57th STREET,**

**NEW YORK**

*Catalogue of the*

# MUSEUM OF LIVING ART

(New York University)

A bound volume, containing an essay on the Plan of the Museum, by A. E. Gallatin, and articles by G. L. K. Morris "On America and a Living Art," by James Johnson Sweeney on "Painting," and by Jean Hélión on "The Evolution of Abstract Art as shown in the Museum of Living Art." In addition there are 45 fine whole-page reproductions of works of art by Picasso, Braque, Léger, Matisse, Miro, Gris, Arp, Klee, Mondrian, etc.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY BOOKSTORE  
18 Washington Place, New York

50 cents — Postage 10 cents

---

## PARTISAN REVIEW

Editors: F. W. Dupee, Dwight Macdonald,  
Mary McCarthy, George L. K. Morris, William

A Marxist Literary Monthly

Phillips, Philip Rahv.

Poetry, Fiction, Articles, by Ignazio Silone, Andre Gide, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Wallace Stevens, Sidney Hook, Balcomb Greene, Meyer Schapiro, Ferdinand Lundberg, and others

Monthly Art Chronicle, with reproductions, by George L. K. Morris

22 East 17th Street, New York

\$2.50 a year (12 issues)

---

**ART BOOKS IN  
ALL LANGUAGES**

# E. WEYHE

794 Lexington Ave., N. Y. C.

*send for catalogue*

# PLASTIQUE

A magazine devoted to the study  
and appreciation of Abstract Art

Editors: S. H. Arp and C. Domela

with the collaboration of Hans Arp, A. E. Gallatin, and George L. K. Morris  
No. 3 (Winter 1938) is devoted to the abstract movement in America

For yearly subscription (3 issues) send money  
order for \$1.50 to S. H. Arp, 21 rue des Cha-  
taigniers, Meudon-Val-Fleury, S. et O., France

---

GREETINGS TO THE **american abstract artists**

**ARTISTS UNION OF AMERICA**

FOR THE FEDERAL ARTS  
BILL AND A DEMO-  
CRATIC AMERICAN CULTURE

---

## DESIGN LABORATORY

OF THE FEDERATION TECHNICAL SCHOOL  
116 EAST 16 STREET • NEW YORK CITY

*offers*

4 YEAR COURSES OF INTEGRATED TECHNICAL • AESTHETIC •  
SOCIOLOGICAL TRAINING IN THESE FOUR FIELDS OF

## INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

PRODUCT • TEXTILE • DISPLAY • INTERIOR  
CATALOG ON REQUEST

---

**the hans hofmann school of fine art**

the former schule fuer bildende kunst in munich

52 west 9th street  
new york city

MODERN PAINTINGS AND  
SCULPTURE, ANCIENT ART  
OF AFRICA AND AMERICA

**Pierre Matisse**

51 EAST 57<sup>th</sup> STREET, NEW YORK

REBAY

N . N.Y. City  
6512 AMERICAN ABSTRACT  
.A2 ARTISTS  
A38 1938

REBAY

N N.Y. City  
6512 AMERICAN ABSTRACT  
.A2 ARTISTS  
A38 1938

DATE LOANED	BORROWER'S NAME	DATE RETURNED
10/13/77	J. Lukash	

